THE CEREMONIES OF ORDINATION OF A PRIEST

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IF we consider the sacred rites of ordination as a simple ceremony of investiture, we can find no other more solemn and more venerable: neither the imposing authority of great parliaments, nor the pomp of royal consecrations, nor even the majestic liturgy with which the priests of the Old Law were introduced into the temple and set apart for the service of Jehovah. And even if we should meet in human investitures much that would appeal to our senses, we shall see in them nothing to equal the mysterious and profound efficacy of the sacerdotal consecration."[1] Thus spoke the noted Dominican preacher Pere Monsabre and certainly anyone who has witnessed such an ordination ceremony must be struck with the thought that here indeed is a liturgical drama quite in keeping with the dignity of the office that is conferred. In bestowing this Order, the Church comes forth in all her splendor to raise mortal man to a dignity which none but an intelligence that is divine could have conceived. Full of this thought, she "would impress on us her sense of the majesty of the functions with which her priests are charged, by the character of the rite through which she conveys them. It is the longest of the ordination services, the most varied in its features, the most arresting in its tone, the most awful in its accompaniments." In perhaps no other way is the dignity of Christ's priesthood more forcefully brought home to us. *Alter Christus*—thus is the sublime office of the priest expressed, and if we would see God's ambassadors through the eyes of the Church, we must assist at the solemn rites by which the Christ communicates to His "other Christs" the office of His priesthood.

In the Apostolic Age, when the twelve went forth to preach Christ crucified and to spread the Church He had founded, almost immediately they found it necessary to choose from among the faithful worthy men to assist them and to carry on the ministry when they themselves should have followed the great Highpriest to the twelve

[1] J. M. L. Monsabre, *Exposition du Dogme Catholique* (9th ed., Paris, 1901), XIV, 29.

seats prepared for them. We know from the Acts of the Apostles that the essential sign or ceremony of this setting apart was the imposition of hands. This was a sign of power or grace conferred, for when the Apostle Paul was chosen, with Barnabas, to instruct the Gentiles, the elders "fasting and praying and imposing hands upon them, sent them away." Throughout the ages, even to our own day, this imposition of hands has remained an essential part of the ceremony of ordination even though other parts have been added or changed. In order to view properly this impressive act of the liturgy, let us take our place in spirit at an ordination ceremony.

As the hour approaches, the procession enters the church, headed by the crucifix, symbol of the yoke which these "other Christs" have chosen to bear. The procession itself brings home to us the marvellous hierarchical system of the Church for immediately behind the cross-bearer walk the younger clerics—those who perhaps but yesterday forswore the honors of the world for the Lord Who is the portion of their inheritance; next come those to whom have been committed the duties attached to the minor orders and the subdiaconate. These, preceding the deacons, advance only as far as the entrance to the sanctuary, for as yet theirs is not the privilege of approaching the altar. The older priests, many of them alert and vigorous, some bent and feeble, all still clearly visualizing the day of their own sacerdotal consecration, escort into the sanctuary the deacons about to be ordained. Finally, in the place of honor, surrounded by his attendants, walks the venerable successor of the Apostles in whom resides not only the dignity of the priesthood, but also the power of communicating that dignity to others.

It was at the Last Supper that Jesus first gave to His disciples the priestly power as regards the principal act of their ministry, namely, the power to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice. Hence the Church, imitating her Founder, has chosen to confer the priesthood during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. It was the primitive custom of the Roman Church, at least from the fifth century, to hold ordinations in the night between Saturday of Ember Week and Sunday. The ceremonies took place about midnight and Sunday was usually far advanced before the ordination was completed so that the Mass of ordination was considered the Mass of the Sunday. In after years, these severe vigils were given up and the ordination Mass was anticipated on the morning of the Ember day. The Saturdays of the Ember weeks and the Saturdays preceding Passion Sunday and Easter are even now specified as the days on which ordinations are to be held, but very

frequently the prelate is allowed to choose another day, preferably a Sunday or Holy Day.

When the bishop has finished the Tract or Sequence of the Mass, he seats himself before the middle of the altar and those who are to be ordained are called forward. Long ago did they hearken to the call of the Master and now they hear the voice of His representative bidding them in His name, to advance. The archdeacon presents them testifying to their worthiness, but since, to use the metaphor of the liturgy, the success of a voyage depends in great part on the harmony existing between the captain and the passengers of the ship, the faithful are admonished to "freely disclose whatever you know of their conduct and morals, and what you think of their worthiness; and let your assent to their ordination be given because of their merit rather than through any partiality to them. If anyone, therefore, has anything against them, let him come forward and declare it in God's name and for God's sake; but let him be mindful of his own condition."

In this address to the people permitting them to make known defects which would exclude any candidate from the priesthood, we have a survival of the custom once existing in virtue of which the faithful elected and presented to the bishop the ministers of the church. This is not however to be understood in the sense of excluding the necessity of a call from God. In the Old Law, neither the judges, nor kings, nor the people could depute to the service of the altar one whom divine choice had not designated. If this was true for a figurative priesthood, how much more is it true "when there are no longer figures, when it is a question of continuing the saving ministry of the Universal Priest and of giving to Jesus Christ the living instruments of His sacerdotal power."[2]

The bishop next addresses the candidates pointing out to them the dignity of the priesthood and their obligation to "receive it worthily and discharge its functions in a praiseworthy manner." He thus exhorts them: "Let the sweet odor of your lives be the delight of the Church of Christ, that by your preaching and example you may build up the house, that is, the family of God; so that neither we who ordain you to so high an office, nor you who undertake it, may be condemned by God, but rather that both may be worthy of a reward."

Sublime indeed is such an office, weighty is their responsibility. To obtain the graces they require, there is need to use the greatest means the liturgy affords. While they prostrate themselves in token of humility, all the saints of Paradise are invoked on their behalf, patri-

[2] Monsabre, *op. cit.*, p. 14

archs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins, and all the angels of heaven. To the usual Litany of the Saints, three special invocations are added that God may vouchsafe "to bless, sanctify and consecrate these elect."

The first of the triple imposition of hands next takes place. This imposition, the most important of the three according to most theologians, is made in silence—a silence which but accentuates the importance and solemnity of the action itself. Since on this day the candidates need the most copious graces, all the priests present likewise place their hands on the heads of the young Levites. And here we come to what is perhaps to the spectator the most impressive part of the ceremony. After the first imposition of hands, all the priests gather around the bishop before the altar and all hold their right hands extended over the candidates while the bishop prays "that God the Father Almighty may multiply His heavenly gifts on these His servants whom He has chosen for the office of the priesthood." As early as the sixth century this ceremony was prescribed and in it we have a striking indication of the unity and fraternal charity which should exist among the priests of God.

"Ask and you shall receive" was the command of our Lord. Well does the Church realize the needs of these young Levites today and so the ritual prescribes another prayer beseeching God to "pour out upon these Thy servants the blessing of the Holy Ghost and the power of priestly grace." Then follows a preface in which after recalling the manifold graces granted of old to Aaron and his sons, the priests of the Old Law and to the Apostles, the first priests of the New Dispensation, we ask the same helps for our infirmity and the bestowal of the dignity of the priesthood on these servants that they may be holy, prudent and just "that when they come to render an account of the stewardship entrusted to them, they may receive the reward of everlasting happiness."

Having thus invoked the aid of God, the bishop deems it fitting to confer on the candidates the insignia of their office. This he does by moving the stole from the left shoulder, placing it around the neck and crossing it over the breast—a very evident symbol of the yoke of Christ, as the accompanying words indicate, "Receive ye the yoke of the Lord; for His yoke is sweet and His burden light." The chasuble is then placed over the shoulders of the candidate. This is the characteristic vestment of the priest. It signifies charity—"Receive the priestly vestment, by which charity is signified"—since he who wears it consecrates the sacrament of charity, i. e. the Holy Eucharist.

Spiritual writers consider it a symbol also of protection, a spiritual suit of armor (the Latin *casula* means a little house), or of the yoke of obedience and the burden of the priesthood. The cross embroidered on the back weighs lightly on those shoulders now, but ere he is called to his reward, the burden of a heavier cross may often cause him pain and sorrow. Since the ceremony is still unfinished and the plenitude of priestly power still to be conferred, the chasuble is folded up to the shoulders in the back.

Before the next step, the bishop again turns our thoughts to heaven when, in one of the most beautiful prayers of the ceremony, he prays God to bestow upon these servants the favor of His blessing "that meditating on Thy law day and night, they may believe what they read, teach what they believe and practise what they teach. . . . . And, on the day of the just and eternal judgment of God, may they, with conscience pure, with true faith, and full of the Holy Spirit, rise by stainless charity unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ: through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord."

Having thus petitioned God the Father, through the merits of God the Son, the bishop kneels and in a loud voice intones the invocation to the Holy Ghost *Veni, Creator Spiritus.* If the faithful have need of the aid of the seven-fold gifts of the Holy Spirit, how much more these who are soon to be endowed with the plenitude of sacerdotal power, power over the Body of Christ Himself. It was the Paraclete Who instilled into the first twelve priests the wisdom, zeal, piety and fortitude that enabled them to conquer a pagan world. In this hymn, used more frequently in the liturgy than any other except the *Te Deum,* we beg the same graces for these latest successors to the Christian priesthood and while the choir continues the hymn, the bishop again is seated and as the candidates kneel before him, he anoints the palms of their hands with the holy oils. Anointing with oil has from time immemorial signified strengthening, refreshing, healing, and these hands destined to touch things the most sacred, to beget God Himself sacramentally, must be consecrated and sanctified by the *spiritalis unctio,* the spiritual unction, of the Sanctifier. It is because of this anointing that when the sacrament of Extreme Unction is conferred on a priest, the hands are anointed on the backs instead of on the palms as with the faithful in general.

The hands are then bound together with a white cloth. From this we may see "that the priest is being dedicated to God not only in soul but in body. . . . The Church claims (as it were) those hands for

her own. Those hands, newly anointed, are to be kissed by the faithful after the ceremony . . . . because the bishop in the name of the whole Church has prayed Almighty God to bless whatever these hands touch in benediction."[3]

At the beginning of the ordination ceremony, the bishop pointed out to the ordinands their duty to offer sacrifice in addition to blessing, governing and teaching the faithful. This power of sacrifice is now given to them by presenting to them a chalice containing wine and water, on which is placed a paten with an unconsecrated host. When the bishop is assured that the candidate is properly touching the sacred vessels, he says to each, "Receive the power to offer sacrifice to God and to celebrate Mass for the living and for the dead. In the name of the Lord. Amen." St Thomas holds that by the giving of the chalice the priestly character is imprinted on the soul of the priest.[4] The hands remain bound during this ceremony showing us the intimate connection between the grace signified by the oil of anointing and the chief office of the priest. The binding cloth is also considered as symbolizing the girdle of St. Paul with which the prophet Agabus bound his own hands and feet, foretelling the apprehension of Paul by the Jews. These successors of the Apostles in the priestly office may also one day be bound and delivered into the hands of their enemies to be subjected to insult and suffering, but the strengthening grace of the great Highpriest has not been given them in vain.

The Mass now procedes and from the offertory on the newly ordained recite aloud in unison with the bishop the words of the Mass, so that the Mass is really celebrated by all together. This then is in truth their "first Mass." We have here a remnant of an ancient custom formerly prevailing in the Church according to which when a bishop celebrated, all the priests of the particular church celebrated with him as a manifestation of the unity of the Church and an indication that the Holy Sacrifice is offered, not for the celebrant only, but for all who assist.

After all have received Communion from the hands of the bishop, the communion prayer is recited, a prayer that must fill with joy the already overflowing hearts of these newest priests. The words of the prayer are none other than the words of the Master spoken during the touching farewell discourse to His disciples. "I will not now call you servants, but my friends because you have known all the things which

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[3] Ronald A. Knox, *The Belief of Catholics* (London, 1927), p. 182.
[4] *Summa Theologica,* Suppl., q. 37, a. 5.

I have wrought in the midst of you. Alleluia. Receive in you the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete. He it is whom the Father will send you."

It was after His death and glorious resurrection that Christ gave to the Apostles the power to forgive sins. Now after the mystical shedding of Christ's blood has been accomplished in the Holy Sacrifice, the newly ordained, having made profession of faith, kneel before the bishop for the third imposition of hands and the reception of this power of remitting sins. The chasuble, which has remained folded during the entire ordination, is then let down for now the plenitude of priestly power is theirs. They are priests forever.

Since discipline and obedience are so necessary for the proper government of the Church, the ordained once more come forward and placing their hands between those of the bishop, promise fidelity and reverence to the ordinary. But this domination is one not of severity but one tempered by love and charity and so the bishop gives to each the kiss of peace saying, "The peace of the Lord be ever with thee."

After a special blessing and a final prayer for strength and grace for these young priests, the Mass is ended as usual with the Gospel of St. John. Perhaps nothing would be more fitting for may we not say of these "other Christs" what the Beloved Disciple wrote of the Christ, "as many as received him to them he gave power to become the sons of God?"

